

The University of Chicago

THE PLACE OF TENTATIVENESS
IN CURRENT CHRISTIAN
THEISM

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
AND ETHICS

1933

By
HAROLD AUGUSTUS BOSLEY

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CHAPTER I

PRESUPPOSITIONS

This dissertation is based upon the assumption (or rule) that changes in philosophy produce corresponding changes in theology. Two of the most significant concepts in recent philosophical thought are probability and contingency. Philosophy is struggling to make them at home. It is inevitable that they should influence theology sooner or later. Taken together, the notions of probability in epistemology and of contingency in metaphysics are the intensional meanings of the concept tentativeness which is so widely feared, and so little understood, in religious circles. Hence, this investigation aims to clarify the concept of tentativeness and to determine its significance in contemporary Christian theism by reference to two systems of theism and in relation to the misunderstandings which it evokes in popular religious thought. It is hoped that such a venture will be treated at least as a prophecy regarding the future of the concept in religious thought.

Tentativeness must not be confused with openmindedness. The latter may be entirely lacking in the relevant objective factors which make tentativeness inevitable. When openmindedness bases itself upon probability and contingency it becomes tentativeness. Tentativeness may be roughly characterized as enforced openmindedness.

CHAPTER II

THE MEANING OF TENTATIVENESS

A. The Logic of Probability

Probability is that branch of logic which endeavors to disclose the principles by which one belief is rationally preferred over another.¹ It aims to relate premises and conclusions in a convincing manner.² Hence, the subject matter of probability is the relations between sets of propositions, between premises and conclusion. Another way to put it is that probability inheres in the relations that we see or claim to see between propositions or data that we know and conclusions that we think follow from them. To utilize terms which will be defined in detail in the following: Probability is the only degree of truth which can be derived from the three factors which are related in all judgments of existential fact. These factors are the "given" of sensory data with its various unique qualities; the universe of reference or conceptual structures by which the given is interpreted and which predicts certain consequences of the given; and the conclusion which is one of the consequences specified by the conceptual interpretation. Possibility of error is uneliminable on at least two points: (1) interpretation of the given,³ (2) the universe of reference may be too limited in its scope of relevant experiences adequately to interpret the given.⁴ A third

¹ J. M. Keynes, A Treatise on Probability (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921), p. 51.

² Quoted by Keynes, op. cit., p. 91.

³ C. I. Lewis, Mind and The World Order (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 312.

⁴ Ibid., p. 330.

factor, equally uneliminable, is the notorious fallibility of human reason which must be closely guarded lest unwarranted inferences run rife.

As a logical existent the truth of any probability is not conditional upon the coming to pass of the conclusion but upon the validity of the inferences from the premises.⁵ Where the data are fragmentary, i.e. where unimpeachable certainty does not reside in the premises, not one alone but several probability-relations exist. If each is a valid inference, each is a true probability. Logicians must then put two questions at the constellation of probabilities: (1) Which one is most probable? and, (2) Is each probability more probable than not?⁶ Exigencies of life usually demand an answer only to the former,⁷ but logicians cannot shirk the latter.⁸

A satisfactory probability system demands an epistemological basis that will do at least two things: (1) overcome the dualism between subjective and objective in knowledge, else any kind of truth vanishes into futility; (2) provide a way whereby knowledge can not only be obtained but by which it can also be corrected since the aim of the probability system is to uncover the basic principles by which any particular probability can be increased. Keynes admits his inability to furnish a satisfactory epistemology.⁹ We feel that there is genuine help for Keynes in the epistemology advanced by C. I. Lewis.¹⁰ The doctrine that our world contains in it the disjunctions that we see; that the given is the irreducible sensuousness or the qualia which serve as clues

⁵ Ibid., pp. 346 f.; Cf. Keynes, op. cit., p. 221; C. D. Broad, Mind (new series), XXVII, pp. 391 f.

⁶ Keynes, op. cit., p. 261 f.

⁷ Lewis, op. cit., p. 334.

⁸ Keynes is gloomy about it, op. cit., pp. 30, 103 f.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 261 f.

¹⁰ Lewis, op. cit.; especially chapters II-VI, IX, X.

to future behavior of existence, which future behavior is predicted by the conceptual pattern, relational structure, or context, called the concept; that there is the uneliminable possibility of error in the application of the concept to existence, which possibility future experiences must verify--this doctrine provides a defensible basis for Keynes' probability system.

Taking the argument one step further, both Lewis¹¹ and Keynes¹² agree that a valid probability has in it an element of certainty. In the epistemology just outlined certainty derives from two separate sources: (1) the given is taken for granted, is assumed without question to be "there," and it is treated as a reliable clue to the object of which it is a part or a manifestation; (2) the concepts or categories which are the criteria of reality. These principles of interpretation which are certain determiners of reality are analytic and a priori.¹³ This element of certainty is basic in all knowledge. In all logical procedure (and in common sense judgments) there is a basis of knowledge--whether in the form of axiomatic propositions by which the truth or falsity of any other proposition is judged or an unquestioned body of experience--from which the probability relation proceeds to the conclusion. Though future experiences may repudiate this particular basis of knowledge or certainty, the probability is still a valid and true inference from the data and premises upon which it rests.

The logic of probability is basic in inductive procedure, but we must not fall into the fallacy of separating induction and deduction by an unbridgeable void.¹⁴ They are separated in degree,

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 310 f.

¹² Op. cit., pp. 53 (footnote), 299.

¹³ Lewis, op. cit., p. 311; also, Chapter III.

¹⁴ M. R. Cohen, Reason and Nature (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931), pp. 115-125.

not in kind. Induction becomes deduction only when it lays bare some invariant relation amongst the phenomena of a given field that simulates the invariant relations of mathematics and logic.¹⁵ Such invariant relations alone can make deduction a logic of discovery. Induction does not dispense with universals, rather it is dependent upon them; (1) because the very perception of the particular depends upon a universal which determines the relevance of the particular, and (2) empirical generalization rests upon an assumption of homogeneity which cannot be demonstrated.¹⁶ Induction must assume something about Nature that runs beyond the known facts, and hence, is probable only. The logic of induction would be blocked at the beginning without the assumption either of the homogeneity of the class to which the particulars under scrutiny belong or at least an assumption of the limited variety of the particulars and their participation in diverse classes.¹⁷ Obviously, this is probable only. Keynes¹⁸ and Broad¹⁹ favour what the former calls the "Inductive Hypothesis," namely, that there is a limited variety in the universe. This alone makes induction more than a "guessing game."²⁰ Induction as simple enumeration is of value only as a supplementary method to that of Analogy.²¹ By analogy is meant the likening of two particulars in as many ways as possible and generalizing therefrom.²² This is the method of scientific procedure.²³ "Natural laws" are statistical correlations of empirical data, or, empirical generalizations.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 119 f.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 115-116.

¹⁷ Keynes, op. cit., p. 258.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 258.

¹⁹ Broad, op. cit., (Part II) Mind, XXIX, pp. 42-43.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

²¹ Cohen, op. cit., p. 132; Keynes, op. cit., pp. 234 f.

²² Keynes, op. cit., pp. 220 ff.

²³ Ibid., p. 241; Cohen, op. cit., p. 132.

Hence, they can claim nothing higher than probable truth value.

Attention is again directed to the fact that the truth-value of probabilities is that of logical validity. If a probability-judgment is based on valid inference, it is absolutely and eternally true.²⁴ The premises on which it rests may be repudiated as inadequate, but the probabilities based on them, if validly drawn, remain as valid inferences, hence true. They only cease to be of practical significance because their premises are false. But we must be clear on this point: The relativity of the premises does not affect the truth-value (so conceived) of legitimate probabilities. Each change in the premises produces a new premise and, hence, new probabilities. One can say that the latter premises are truer than the former, but it is not correct to reason that, therefore the latter probabilities are truer than the former. This important aspect of the logic of probability must not be forgotten when we agree with Keynes that probability begins and ends with probability.²⁵

B. The Doctrine of Contingency in Contemporary Metaphysics

Contingency, as we shall be using the concept, is synonymous with chance, indeterminateness, and the unpredictable. It is not the result of ignorance, but is inherent in the nature of reality. As such it is an objectively discernible factor in existence. The concept of novelty which is so widely used is a corollary of contingency in reality.

Whenever pragmatism makes so bold as to advance a metaphysics, contingency is one of the essential concepts in it. John Dewey paves the way in this emphasis upon contingency. For him, contingency is an irreducible fact of existence, (1) because

²⁴ Lewis, op. cit., pp. 346 ff.; Keynes, op. cit., p. 221.

²⁵ Op. cit., pp. 322-323.

of the vital mixture of the stable and the precarious in nature,²⁶ and, (2) because any observation which we make in the knowing process is inescapably relative, hence contingent.²⁷

George Herbert Mead's philosophy of the present (or the emergent) stresses the contingent aspects of reality.²⁸ For Mead, there are two strains of influence which constitute any emergent.²⁹ One is the organization of the preceding present, which, when it attained the status of an emergent likewise became a substance in that it was characterized by fixed laws.³⁰ Hence this complex of relationships enters into the passage which conditions the emerging present as a certain, predictable, known factor.³¹ If this were the only source of conditioning, there would be no emergent; the laws would issue in a present which would be identical with its predecessors. But a second strain of influence comes in from an utterly unpredictable angle and exercises an unpredictable influence upon the emerging present. Why these particular factors should come we have no way of knowing. Sheer contingency operates in the fact of their impingement. We have no way of knowing what they are until the present which they condition becomes a full-blown emergent. Then the laws of the emergent are ferreted out and the novel influences are allocated as part of the past of the present.³²

²⁶ J. Ratner, The Philosophy of John Dewey (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1928), Chapter I; J. Dewey, The Quest for Certainty (New York: Minton, Balch, and Co., 1929), pp. 243 ff.; J. L. Childs, Education and the Philosophy of Experimentalism (New York: The Century Co., 1931), pp. 51-55.

²⁷ Dewey, op. cit., pp. 202-206.

²⁸ G. H. Mead, The Philosophy of The Present (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1932).

²⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. xvii, 13.

³¹ Ibid., p. 23; also, ibid., p. 47 for stress upon the importance of passage.

³² Ibid., p. 33; also, ibid., pp. 36 ff.

Two corollaries ensue. One is that the past is contingent. What the past of this present is, science can determine to some degree; ideally, of course, completely. But what this past was going to be while the preceding present with its past held sway, not even omniscience could determine. The component parts of any past are indecipherable until the present which they condition has emerged and incorporated them into a substance with fixed structure. The second corollary is that the future is contingent. Science may know with meticulous accuracy the laws and relations that dominate each present and which enter into the conditioning of the future. Without being able completely to prewise the character and direction of the future because the unique, hence, characteristic, features of this derive from unpredictable sources; sources which are not known prior to the fulfilment of the emergent. Hence, the emergent is made up of two factors which may be denoted as Rational and Irrational.

With Dewey, Mead finds that contingency is an uneliminable characteristic of the knowing process.³³ The world is composed of a multiplicity of consentient sets each of which has its own spatio-temporal relations. All are equally valid points of view. But the problem of securing an objective perspective is acute. An objective perspective is a synthesis of the perspectives of all consentient sets interested in the object; a synthesis which will recognize the uniqueness of each constituent perspective yet which is an objective perspective because it includes this diversity of perspectives. Manifestly, the objective perspective is at the mercy of contingent factors. New consentient sets which perceive the object in hitherto indescribable terms will submit their insight as a valid perception. Since it must be accepted an alter-

³³ Mead's concept of sociality is a phase of this problem.

ation of the objective perspective will ensue. Recognition of this is not to deny that as a synthesis of perspectives the objective perspective possesses a mathematically demonstrable certainty that is higher than that which can be ascribed to any one of its constituent parts. Contingency is ineradicable because the appearance of a new consentient set and the nature of its view of the object are unpredictable factors.

Morris Cohen's Reason and Nature³⁴ is one of the most eminent contributions of contemporary rationalism to metaphysical inquiry. One of his most compelling insights is conveyed in the principle of polarity,³⁵ which holds that the complexities of Nature demand that philosophy cease trying to slur differences in the interests of truth. Truth demands that the antithetical character of opposites be recognized and held together. For example, Cohen insists that existence is both rational³⁶ and irrational;³⁷ that is, it displays aspects which can be described in no other terms. Since Cohen's thought on contingency arises where the rational and the irrational aspects of existence touch, we turn immediately to them. (1) The data of science are contingent, i.e. science does not create the data from formulae but the data have an objectivity about them that formulae must fit.³⁸ (2) Facts irrelevant to an hypothesis in scientific procedure sustain an ultimately indescribable and unpredictable relationship to the relevant facts and the system in which they inhere.³⁹ (3) The very laws of relationships are contingent in that it is impossible to explain why they determine what they do determine and not something else. That the system of invariant relations which de-

³⁴ Cohen, op. cit..

³⁵ Ibid., pp. xi, 18 f., 135, 412.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 142, 153; also, pp. 143 f.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. xi, 134, 135, 136, 164.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 151.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 151.

termines existence in any given temporal span does so operate is a contingent fact. That it will be continuous with the preceding system is inevitable, but that it will be different is also inevitable.⁴⁰ (4) The principle of diveristy and discontinuity is integral to existence and makes contingency an ineradicable fact of existence.⁴¹

In this chapter we have witnessed philosophy's earnest encounter with the logic of probability in epistemology and the doctrine of contingency in metaphysics. Epistemologically, the truths by which we live--empirical truths--are probable only. But probability must not be equated with skepticism. Metaphysically, the world in which we live is an open world. It is not fixed in one all embracing form. Reality is multiple and existence exhibits not one process or system but many. With these facts in mind we turn to theology to see what difference, if any, these significant changes in philosophic thought are making in its formulations.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 151 f.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 154.

CHAPTER III
THE PLACE OF TENTATIVENESS IN TWO CONTEMPORARY SYSTEMS
OF THEISTIC THOUGHT

Philosophers of religion who espouse theism fall into two general groups: Supernaturalists and Naturalists. This chapter is set to the task of presenting the epistemology and metaphysics of a distinguished member of each group to the end of determining whether or not tentativeness has any genuine place in either system. This is no endeavor to settle the issue between the two schools of thought; it aims to determine their relations to the notion of tentativeness.

A. The Theistic Supernaturalism of John Oman¹

Oman's epistemology argues that there are four types of knowing: awareness, apprehension, comprehension, and explanation.² The first type of knowing--awareness--is the most inclusive. It is characterized by keen activity of all our senses. The whole of the environment is accepted. The second type of knowing results when in this field of awareness we single out some one object and allow the rest of the field to fade into the background. The third type of knowing results when we begin to address ourselves to the isolated object to the end of understanding its purpose. In this type of knowing the field of awareness, save the object under scrutiny, disappears. The fourth type of knowing consists in a sustained effort to understand by means of various explanations the nature and functioning of the object of our attention.

¹ John Oman, The Natural and The Supernatural (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931). Grace and Personality (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1925).

² The Natural and The Supernatural, pp. 120 ff.

The concrete characteristics of the object are ignored and attention is centered on the principles involved in it. Hence, the field of awareness is even narrower than in comprehension.

Awareness and apprehension are closely related, as are comprehension and explanation. A clearly distinguishable break separates the four types of knowing into these two pairs. This is most evident when we come to the function of the pairs. Awareness and apprehension are the sources of all knowledge; they are basic to the other types. It is their function to perceive environment. Since comprehension and explanation are derivative from the first two, and since their concern is much narrower and more purposive, their function is instrumental; they intend to use the environment, to evolve principles that will lay it under dominion.

All knowledge derives from awareness and apprehension. The raw materials out of which all logics come are first found in these types of knowing. If there is evidence of a logic of probability, the data must first appear in awareness and apprehension. The type of knowledge which these types of knowing yield is not reducible to propositions. Rather it is in the form of intuition of absolutes--absolute meaning, ideal values, and ideal sacred. The question of verifiable validity does not arise. The intuitions carry their own validation. This is the realm of certainty par excellence. Whatever cognitive certainty may be found in comprehension and explanation derives from the boundless wealth of cognitive certainty which characterizes awareness and apprehension.

Comprehension and explanation deal with manipulatory meanings, natural values, and material sacred. Man's judgments as to the exact nature of these is fallible and is stated in

propositional form. Consequently, whatever method is most efficient in correcting judgments is persistently sought. Hence, the logic of probability enters the last two types of knowing as an ally. It has no place in the intuition of absolutes, but when absolutes are focussed upon particular situations, uncertainty results and verification is sought. It is in the process of verification that probability plays its part.

As we turn to the metaphysics of this system we are confronted with the necessity of distinguishing between the Natural and the Supernatural, the Supernatural and God, and the ultimate status of good and evil.

The Supernatural is the most inclusive way of describing the one environment which enfolds us. The Natural is an abstract phase of the Supernatural. Metaphorically, the Supernatural is the outer of two concentric circles while the Natural is the inner one. But this is not to bifurcate environment because the "stuff" or substance or peculiar qualities which characterize the Supernatural are really characteristic of the Natural only they are ignored by man in the interests of a closer practical adjustment to environment.

God and the Supernatural are not synonymous. God manifests himself through the Supernatural.³ Knowledge of the Supernatural is a knowledge of the manifestations of God, but not of God himself. But the world has God's meaning and purpose in it,⁴ and life is best thought of as God's dealing with us in his world.⁵ All of which points toward a metaphysical monism.

What, then, is the ultimate status of good and evil? Oman is clear on the point that while evil is not illusory it

³ Ibid., p. 342.

⁴ Ibid., p. 469.

⁵ Grace and Personality, p. 117.

has no place in the ultimate nature of things.⁶ It is explicitly affirmed that all things work together for good to those who love God and seek his purpose in the world.⁷ Hence, evil is not ultimate however real it seems to be. This too points toward a metaphysical monism.

Only one consideration causes us to hesitate about calling Oman a monist, i.e. his notion of freedom. Consider: If, as Oman argues, men have the freedom to direct themselves in the light of their self-consciousness, and if this is the only way they truly find God, and if God does not coerce them but must await their own insight and devotion, do we not have God limited by free moral personalities whose actions he cannot foresee and whose steps he cannot direct? The logical answer is that God is so limited, but Oman denies this.⁸ He does not clarify the contradiction in his system. But there is no equivocation on the point that God and good comprise the one ultimate reality. Hence we conclude that Oman's metaphysics issues in a monism of good.

The place of tentativeness in this system of theism is easily described. There is no logic of probability in the types of knowing which reveal the Supernatural, though ample place is made for it in the ways of knowing the Natural. In so far as theism as a philosophy of religion deals with the Supernatural it eschews probability in knowledge. A metaphysical monism of good allows no room for contingency. Chance is ruled out. This is God's world and what it does is his doing. We conclude, therefore, that whenever theism lays claim to ways of knowing which transcend the possibility of error and the need of verification of beliefs, and, also, rests its case finally in a monism of good it has no

⁶ Ibid., pp. 65, 169; The Natural and The Supernatural, pp. 290 f.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 68, 117.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 89 f.

place for tentativeness.

B. The Theistic Naturalism of H. N. Wieman

Professor Wieman claims that the theory of knowledge by which he proceeds is that outlined by C. I. Lewis. He also acknowledges indebtedness to the thought of A. E. Murphy in whose writings the philosophy of Objective Relativism has been expounded. Since we have examined the salient points in Lewis' thought in the first chapter it satisfies our present purpose simply to indicate that aspect of it which gives rise to the logic of probability. For Murphy⁹ and Lewis¹⁰ alike knowledge is a relative affair. Murphy justifies this conclusion by recourse to metaphysics in which he shows that knowledge as an event shares with any other event the character of relativity which inheres in the nature of event. For Murphy, events are the stuff of nature; each event is a perspective on the rest of the world, and each event has limitless potentialities, each of which is real and objectively valid.¹¹ Lewis keeps close to the epistemological question and asserts that the relativity of knowledge has three distinct aspects which deserve attention. (1) Knowledge is relative to the human mind.¹² (2) Knowledge of reality can be stated only in relative terms--in terms of the variables involved in the knowing act.¹³ (3) If propositions incorporating the relative terms are validly drawn, they are absolutely rather than relatively true of reality. This is not to say that any array of such absolutely true propositions is exhaustive of reality. Any description of reality must be phrased in terms of relative propositions; but until we can

⁹ A. E. Murphy, "Objective Relativism in Dewey and Whitehead," *The Philosophical Review*, XXXVI, p. 137.

¹⁰ Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 155, 164 f., 168, 170.

¹¹ Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹² Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 155, 166.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 170, 172 f.

demonstrate that our corpus of knowledge regarding an object is exhaustive of it our knowledge must be taken for what it is: an absolutely true but none the less partial description of the object. We have previously alluded to Lewis' doctrine that the application of a concept to existence can result only in probable truth since a concept is a system of predications as to future behavior of the given; which future behavior is only a probable occurrent. If it does follow the predictions of the concept, the concept is held to be more probably true than before.

Wieman adopts this point of view. Knowledge for him is tested belief, i.e. concepts which have been partially validated.¹⁴ We have seen that this is always a probable result. One of the most characteristic emphases of Mr. Wieman is upon observation and reason as the only way to test a belief.

Wieman is a metaphysical pluralist. His pluralism resembles that advanced by A. N. Whitehead. This is especially evident in the concepts, structure, process, and possibility. Whitehead develops a speculative system which purports to explain the why of all things by reference to an eternal system of patterns or structures.¹⁵ Structure apart from existence is ideal; in existence it is process. The process displays the characteristics of the structure ordering it. The structure is eternal and changeless. We must be careful and not lapse into a dualism at this point; a dualism between the process and the structure which conditions it. Structure apart from existence becomes process when, and to the extent that, it enters existence. Structure does not subsist in the process but in so far as the structure enters into

¹⁴ H. N. Wieman, The Wrestle of Religion with Truth (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1929), pp. 218 f.; Is There a God? (Chicago: Willett, Clark and Co., 1932), p. 11.

¹⁵ In D. C. Macintosh and Others, Religious Realism (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931), p. 155.

existence it is process displaying unique characteristics. To state the case accurately, we must say that these characteristics are displayed by a certain process in existence and an eternal and changeless structure transcending existence; which transcendence, temporally speaking, assumes the form of possibility for the process. Possibility is relative to process rather than ideal structure.¹⁶ The latter does not display possibility, it constitutes possibility, i.e. patterns or systems which are eternal and changeless. A process, i.e. an instance of existence, has infinite possibilities. Which means that it may go in any one of innumerable channels.

God is one of many structures.¹⁷ The distinctive characteristic of it is that it sustains, promotes and constitutes greatest value. But God does not control all existence, so far as we know.¹⁸ Evil is as real as good. It displays opposing characteristics; whereas value reflects unity, evil reflects diversity akin to hostility.¹⁹ Wieman's theory of value (which is closely akin to that advanced by John Dewey) is an amplification of the notion that God is that structure of existence and possibility which sustains, promotes and constitutes greatest value.²⁰ The theory of evil as multiple and antagonistic processes in existence against which the unifying efforts of progressive integration are really contending gives force to Wieman's pluralism.

Wieman takes seriously the logic of probability in his various propositional assertions about God.²¹ He is keenly alive to the relativity of knowledge and to the limits which surround

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 158; Is There a God?, p. 123.

¹⁷ Is There a God?, pp. 13 f.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 201 f.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 208.

²⁰ "Religion in John Dewey's Philosophy," The Journal of Religion, XI, p. 11; Is There a God?, p. 317.

²¹ Is There a God?, pp. 81, 121.

certainty. Therefore we may without more ado affirm that tentativeness in so far as it depends upon recognition of the logic of probability is basic in Wieman's epistemology.

Then, too, we have seen that he is an avowed pluralist.²² His pluralism perseveres to the end. He refuses to cultivate cosmic optimism by stealthily mastering evil by good. He follows Cohen's emphasis upon the reality of contingency.²³ Hence, we are treated to a metaphysical pluralism in which objective contingency is affirmed. Therefore, tentativeness is accorded a genuine place in Wieman's theistic naturalism. Whenever a theism derives from nature and claims only as much infallibility as other disciplines similarly derived, and claims no more ultimate concord than the facts of existence warrant, it is certain to allow a real place for tentativeness.

Our reflections upon theistic supernaturalism and theistic naturalism can be summed up thus: If supernaturalism insists upon a type of knowing which is infallibly certain and an insight into reality so deeply penetrating as to see that the hostile facts of life are really merged in an ultimate ground, it has no place for tentativeness. On the other hand, naturalism accepts knowledge as a precarious and uncertain fact and is ever striving to increase its probability, and deals with the world, accepting as ultimate, the irreducible distinctions found amongst the facts of existence. Because of this strategy, theistic naturalism needs tentativeness as one of its cardinal concepts.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 280.

²³ Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 151 ff.

CHAPTER IV

THE RELIGIOUS PROBLEM OF TENTATIVENESS

A. Some Religious Leaders' Quest for Certainty

In order to ascertain the nature of the problem created by the notion of tentativeness when it gets beyond the study we must turn from the philosophers and seek men who are accounted "popular" in that they receive a wide hearing. J. G. Gilkey as an influential preacher and W. A. Brown as an eminent theologian have been selected. Both agree that religion must have certainty.¹ Each sets himself to the task of securing certainty. Neither endeavors to define tentativeness and, consequently, fear it rather than understand it. Gilkey struggles to find enough empirical evidence to warrant a belief in an absolute, omnipotent, infinite God. No other will do.² Consequently he states the facts of evil but refuses to reckon with them when he formulates his definition of God.³ Also, he endeavors to prove that the sense of the presence of God is not a delusion but fails to show why the Devil is not as real as God by the same token.⁴ Again, he would prove the existence of the God he thinks we need by argument from Design in nature, which conclusion again omits the facts of evil.⁵ It is at once apparent that tentativeness will not permit either method employed or the conclusions reached. So far as Gilkey is concerned this would be the final argument against the concept of

¹ J. G. Gilkey, The Certainty of God (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1928). W. A. Brown, Pathways to Certainty (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930).

² Gilkey, op. cit., p. 94.

³ Ibid., pp. 35 ff., 95 ff., 102.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 39 ff.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 67 ff.

tentativeness because he demands certainty of beliefs of a comforting nature about God.

Dr. Brown, a more seasoned reasoner, falls into an ambiguity when he defines certainty, and the ambiguity vitiates the main argument of the book.⁶ He insists that certainty inheres in "definite conclusions" and then proceeds to make plain the nature of the definite conclusions. He distinguishes between the assumptions and the hypotheses of religion (following the analogy of science) and allocates certainty in the assumptions while allowing tentativeness in the hypotheses.⁷ God is the assumption of religion while our ideas about him are hypotheses.⁸ If this is taken seriously, what becomes of the definite conclusions which are essential to certainty? There is no answer vouchsafed by Dr. Brown. The so-called hypotheses manifest a continual tendency to crowd into the assumptions. Dr. Brown's endeavor to secure certainty in religion by following the analogy of science is not based upon sound reasoning. To say that science proceeds upon the assumption of the uniformity of nature is not to aver that science does this believing the assumption to be most certain just because it cannot be proved.⁹ Cohen is much nearer the truth when he writes that assumption are retained only so long as they are exhaustive of the known facts. The only way seriously to question them is to suggest another assumption more inclusive of these facts.¹⁰ It is a notorious fact that there are many assumptions which purport to deal more adequately with the facts than does Dr. Brown's assumption of God. Hence this effort to secure certainty must be seriously questioned. Dr. Brown, along with

⁶ Brown, op. cit., p. 22.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 204 ff.

⁸ Ibid., p. 209.

⁹ Ibid., p. 206.

¹⁰ Cohen, op. cit., pp. 80 ff.

Mr. Gilkey, wants certainty of "definite conclusions," of comforting beliefs, but is unable to make his case. May it not be that a re-examination of the nature of religious belief will lay bare the basic difficulty which the concept of tentativeness encounters with thinkers like Gilkey and Brown?

B. The Nature of Religious Belief

Sigmund Freud utilizes the orthodox conception of belief in his attempt to prove religion an illusion.¹¹ Religious doctrines claim to be infallible assertions about reality¹² which are bolstered largely by tradition¹³ and which, if modified or cast out, leave religion without foundation.¹⁴ Since they do not admit either of proof or disproof they are illusions, i.e. derived from wishful thinking and may or may not be true.¹⁵ Scientific inquiry stands in marked contrast, and it yields tested beliefs about reality. Slowly but surely it is overthrowing the reality-content of religious doctrines and hence, is undermining religion.¹⁶ For Freud, religious belief and any kind of investigation of reality are sworn enemies. Manifestly, science is its arch-enemy. If one challenges this conception of belief, he has challenged Freud's entire polemic against religion. We now proceed to the study of two conceptions of belief which do challenge this assumption which undergirds Freud's arguments.

Shailer Mathews regards theology as functional.¹⁷ Beliefs or doctrines are cast in pattern-forms drawn from the dominant

¹¹ S. Freud, The Future of An Illusion (London: Horace Liveright, 1928).

¹² Ibid., p. 43.

¹³ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 68, 95.

¹⁷ Shailer Mathews, The Growth of the Idea of God (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931), p. 6.

interest in the social and political life.¹⁸ Doctrines are aimed to relieve specific tensions in the life of a social group; tensions between inherited values and contemporary changes. Hence, doctrine assumes the form of the contemporary pattern which is accepted without question. With the change in social or political life came a corresponding change in theological doctrine. But all does not change. Doctrine has its permanent continuum as well as its shifting forms. For example, the doctrine of God has as its persistent base the sense of cosmic dependence.¹⁹ This found effective expression in a given age by being presented in the thought-patterns of that age. The truth-value of a doctrine becomes functional, *i.e.* its efficacy in satisfying the need which called it into being. It does not claim to possess an inerrant knowledge of reality.²⁰ Hence the assumption of Freud is denied. Tentativeness is essential to belief conceived as Dean Mathews does. Only by readiness to modify beliefs with the changing age can religion be kept vital.

Professor Wieman holds that beliefs must be given the status of hypothesis whenever doubted. As such they are inclusive of known relevant data and are courses of action which aim to secure more data. Beliefs are essential to religious living because they are channels by which absolute devotion is brought to the reality which beliefs strive to describe. Hence, beliefs are about something. They are efforts to describe a reality. Therefore absolute devotion is given to the reality rather than to beliefs about it.²¹ But it is quite apparent that some amount of conceptualization of this reality is necessary if

¹⁸ Shailer Mathews, The Atonement and the Social Process (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930), p. 25.

¹⁹ The Growth of The Idea of God, p. 5.

²⁰ Op. cit., p. 16.

²¹ Is There a God?, p. 52; especially p. 85.

devotion is to have a further terminal.²² Wieman makes provision for this in his "minimum definition" of God as "that actuality which sustains, promotes and constitutes the supreme good."²³ He proceeds to characterize this as "the basic and indubitable certainty."²⁴ Our amplifications of it may vary and will certainly change in the light of experience. Whenever we propose a more definitive concept that "that," tentativeness enters because the concept is up for testing and may be repudiated by future experience of good. Two facts make it extremely improbable that this concept will come to be more than probable truth: (1) the same datum varies in emphasis with different persons; (2) a great deal of haziness inheres in any concept which is proposed as more definitive than the colorless "that." Hence, tentativeness is essential. Wieman's conception of religious belief is a flat denial of the assumption upon which Freud proceeds. If Mr. Gilkey and Dr. Brown were to adopt either of the conceptions of the nature of belief advanced by Dean Mathews or Mr. Wieman, they would be able to secure a kind of certainty which is rendered articulate only by tentatively held propositions. It is safe to say that the current notion that tentativeness is equivalent to skepticism roots in the same misconception of the nature of religious belief. Consequently, certainty is located in some specific belief as to the nature of reality and when this is disproved, certainty vanishes and religion wanes.

C. Religious Loyalty and Tentativeness

If beliefs are the conditions of loyalty, if any change or modification of them is a religious calamity, then tentativeness

²² E. E. Aubrey, "The Place of Definition in Religious Experience," *The Journal of Philosophy*, XXVII, p. 568.

²³ *Is There a God?*, p. 276.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

is the arch-enemy of religion. But if beliefs are patterns or hypotheses, and are channels by which loyalty is directed toward the reality which they endeavor to symbolize, then tentativeness is an indispensable ally of vital religion. The latter statement outlines the relations between religious loyalty and tentativeness. The loyalty is absolute (constant) in that while it utilizes the belief, expresses itself through the belief, it abides when the belief changes. Were this not the case, if it were not true that the outmoded belief endeavored to symbolize an experienced relationship with reality, though faultily cognized, no new belief would arise to perform more adequately the mediating function. Absolute loyalty, in religion, to an objective reality which is at best inadequately and perhaps mistakenly cognized sets the problem which truer beliefs endeavor correctly to symbolize. But there would be no problem were the loyalty not demanding further light in the interests of adjustment as well as devotion to reality.

Religion demands an absoluteness of devotion. But we are practical creatures and in the interests of living require the light of knowledge by which to walk. We cannot rest with the wisdom which we possess. Its inadequacy alone spurs us onward. Hence our knowledge of God changes with our changing adjustments to him. Unless we hold tentatively the knowledge that we have at any given time it will become a barrier to a fuller knowledge of him. Tentativeness is not operative in complete commitment of oneself to God but such commitment must be directed by the best knowledge which one has about God, and tentativeness is essential in the quest for the most trustworthy knowledge. Therefore we reach the conclusion that the polar terms of absoluteness and tentativeness so defined and understood are interdependent in a way that is both theoretically justifiable and practically essential.

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